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ABSTRACT

Teachers of courses on Russian for business and economics face the difficult task of bridging the objective and subjective needs of students. The need to have large and varied amounts of representative material to introduce unfamiliar concepts and new terminology is a challenge for course designers. Courses should expose students to three categories or levels of information: (1) background information on Russia and its people; (2) directly reported facts, generally consisting of brief statements or announcements; and (3) casual statements, indirectly related topics, or facts with unstated implications requiring the use of inductive reasoning to grasp their relevance. Ways are discussed for covering each of those categories in a topic or unit. (LB)

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Laying a Foundation for Russian for Business and Economics

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The teacher of a course on Russian for business and economics faces the formidable task of bridging the objective and subjective needs of students. Students may not have sufficient mastery of the structure of this inflected language, and further may not have backgrounds in the subject areas to be covered in the course. In other words, the teacher has to contend with a situation that presents the students with built-in stumbling blocks to comprehension. Difficulties in decipherment arise from both the unfamiliar or unexpected information content of the course (which must reflect the current changing reality) and the inherent grammatical complexity of Russian.[1] The amount and variety of representative material to cover which introduces unfamiliar concepts and new terminology, coupled with the practical goal of functioning with this material in Russian (especially at some future date in the business world) can be overwhelming and frustrating.[2] Having identified difficulties with comprehension and frustration as givens, it is useful to note that the two problems tend to feed off each other. Efforts at solving one contribute to solving the other. Thus the course design must incorporate a methodology to foster comprehension and minimize frustration. This involves seeking out and providing toeholds for comprehension, targeting sources of

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frustration, and breaking down communication barriers (linguistic, cultural, thematic) with a view to providing students with a solid base upon which to build the skills to handle business-related information, i.e., processing it, using it, and eventually generating their own -- in short, to function effectively in Russian in a business environment.[3]

Comprehension is a function of familiarity and expectedness -- two variables with low values in this instance. In selecting and preparing course materials the teacher has some degree of control over these variables by minimizing unexpectedness and playing off the students' use of logic and whatever familiar elements are available. But comprehension is not a matter of just the written page. The task of listening comprehension is a more difficult one precisely because the fleetingness of spoken language provides less time to latch onto something familiar and establish a context; the lack of a more permanent record imposes a greater load on the memory when comparing previous and subsequent statements. When designing a course on Russian for business and economics it is necessary to take listening comprehension into account as well, and for some cogent reasons. First and foremost, especially using an approach that focuses on content, it is likely that the course will cover highly practical topics useful in everyday conversation, ranging from matters of casual interest to those having wide-ranging or financial significance; the vocabulary and themes are those of social intercourse likely to be encountered frequently in casual or professional situations. There are also greater opportunities to make use of practical information and practical language skills as

markets expand and cultural and business contacts increase. Second, language is essentially a spoken phenomenon; writing is a secondary manifestation of it. Third, listening comprehension and speaking activities reinforce memory and provide a more solid foundation for the overall learning experience. To sum up then, the problems with comprehension and frustration that stem from the combination of new subject matter and Russian vocabulary and grammar set off a negative chain reaction of frustration with reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and in turn, speech production. Since these problems are all related, it is expedient not to neglect any one of them, and to use a comprehensive approach to integrate all three areas. What the students need is a base on which to build the skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Building this base involves acquainting students with basic information on the Commonwealth of Independent States and current economic developments and opportunities there by providing the language structures to express this information in easily manageable increments, pointing out guideposts but having them take the steps.

The level of frustration can be mitigated with confidence-building materials and tasks that make the most of a limited amount of vocabulary and grammar while actually introducing new terminology and language patterns, and consolidating their understanding of a text (written or audio). The point is to build mastery of the concepts presented (form and content), thereby easing students onto higher levels of communicative ability; a four-skills approach can recycle the material and reinforce learning so that students gain control of the material (mastery). But before attaining mastery of

any material the student has the immediate goal of understanding the content. In order to focus in on content, it is logical to start small, i.e., use brief materials, and work up to longer sequences of information or more involved texts, at all times following the principle of targeting one piece of information at a time.[4] Reapplication of this principle makes longer texts more manageable, and is a real process of building and consolidating comprehension as well as series of achievements. Suggestions for materials for starting small include notices of items for sale or rent, notices of services offered, familiar-looking advertisements, announcements of new products or services available, meeting notices, and short news items such as brief reports (or statements) about business deals or an increase in the cost of some consumer service. The use of such materials, especially with pictures when available, opens up creative possibilities for written and oral communication; students can recycle patterns, substitute different commodities (nouns), make different delivery arrangements, find different trading partners, concoct amusing ad slogans, etc. This format addresses some key sources of frustration for the student, since it takes into consideration that their skill level may not yet be up to functioning comfortably in what amounts to a new field, and that they may have unrealistic expectations as to the amounts and types of material that they can or need to handle with regard to future employment possibilities.[5] In other words, this approach intends to counter anxiety over inadequacy of skills and breadth of knowledge by building communicative skills and confidence through exposing students to a variety of kinds of information and providing them

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with practice dealing with different kinds of information.

It is important that the message not be lost for the words, and that content/gist be the prize which gives students a sense of accomplishment. Before proceeding to extract details or going on to another comprehension task, the student must be sure to have understood the basic message; random grabbing for tidbits of content is counterproductive and should be actively discouraged.

Gradually increasing the length and difficulty of materials is only part of the confidence-building technique. It is not always easy for those unaccustomed to close reading or listening to extract essential information, and what is more, to attend to the implications such information might have. To minimize frustration, one can guide students through a text by setting individual comprehension tasks, eliciting interpretations of key words and phrases, always keeping to the fore the goal of formulating the general picture -- consolidating essential facts to get the point of a connected text. Providing hints, occasional glosses, and a predictable context should enable students to fill in logical gaps, anticipate the next move (be it a word, phrase, or idea), and put the pieces together. In addition to aiding comprehension and encouraging the inductive reasoning process, a set of guide questions to accompany a text (written or audio), as a written assignment, serves to ensure preparation for class; the students have to go through the material and try to understand it, thus laying the groundwork for class participation and discussion, verbalizing, summarizing, interpreting, and reworking the material. So the steps in building comprehension skills, in order of

increasing complexity, involve having students sift through a text to extract highlights, construct the overall picture, and then interpret the content. A more advanced exercise involves having them discuss the implications of what they have digested; having them infer what is not patently stated is a true test of comprehension and communicative ability, and if planned successfully, is rewarding.

All comprehension tasks can be done orally in Russian in the classroom, from pulling out individual words or facts to subsequent tasks making use of them. Students progress from constructing sentences from skeletal information to constructing a short connected "narrative" that demonstrates that the passage has been understood (this stage is appropriate for classroom discussion of errors in fact or understanding). Finally they can make creative use of the language, drawing on their own or other sources of vocabulary, dicsussing implications, possible meanings and ramifications, and reexamining the content critically from the point of view of possible relevance to business. It is at this stage that real encoding of their thoughts in the target language occurs as they communicate not only restatements of factual information, but also formulate some original thoughts. Encouragement to express thoughts orally and in writing may require an instructor to supply touch-ups with grammatical glue; since there is a more lasting record in writing, written assignments are particularly appropriate for this. Writing provides an outlet for attention to grammatical competence, and especially when based on topics worked through in class, reinforces the student's active language production.

In order that students feel comfortable with handling Russian-language materials for practical (business) purposes, the course should expose them to three categories or levels of information: 1. background information on Russia and its people; 2. directly reported facts, for the most part consisting of brief, concise statements or announcements; and 3. casual statements, indirectly related topics, or facts with unstated implications requiring the use of inductive reasoning to grasp their relevance. All three categories can be interrelated to present a particular topic and work through it thoroughly. I will examine each category and then show how a topic or unit can be covered.

1. Background information

Before jumping into joint ventures, students must be familiar with the necessary economic and cultural background information on the Commonwealth of Independent States -- the geography, natural resources, industries, transportation systems, labor, attitudes to work, ethnic diversity, politics, cultural differences -- in short, all the variables that bear on doing business or having intercultural dealings with these countries.[6] Background information is probably the most important category, for it not only adds an area studies dimension to the students' language expertise, it represents an area of knowledge that is <u>presupposed</u>, especially if one is already making plans to do business with or in the CIS, doing market research, setting up a company, or locating personnel and equipment.[7] This knowledge provides the basis for judging people and situations and making decisions. Not only will this background information make students useful to businesses and better

prepared to use their language skills, it also has the added advantage of building a foundation of vocabulary, formal language patterns, and "instant" facts that transfer to needs in advanced or professional situations. Brief sketches in Russian highlighting important facts will provide the necessary vocabulary. To improve listening comprehension, these texts can be introduced orally in class or via audio cassettes with guide questions of what to listen for.

2. Direct statements of fact

This category includes (usually short) blurbs or news items, advertisements, notices of trade agreements or sales, reports of exchanges of delegations, announcements of joint ventures, etc. It should reflect the diversity of current information from relevant media sources and give a representative sampling of what is out there, what is available, and the types of business opportunities being reported and how they are being handled and advertised.

3. Facts by inference

Discussions of implications and prospects come under this category. What this category actually does is help establish an understanding of the business climate (what business people should expect or get ready for) and develop cultural awareness. One can learn a lot about even business practices and legal practices from articles indirectly related to business or the economy, or from the implications of a news story or casually reported facts. An example of such a casual news story from Russia: some boys broke into a freight car of watermelons, and were not discovered until more than two weeks later when they had eaten most of them. But they could

not be prosecuted because technically the goods were not being offered for sale; the owners had decided to keep the melons locked up until they could fetch a sufficiently high price. So what does this say about warehousing practices, business savvy, and the legal system? It is also important to note that the crime explosion in the CIS forms an entire subcategory to be monitored by the perspicacious; lately much information on it has become more widely available.

The use of special focus topics illustrates the process of walking through all three categories -- background information, current facts or news items, and inferential material -- to pull together and to make maximal practical use of different information sources for a valuable purposeful communicative activity. For example, consider a unit on the geography of Siberia and its natural resources. The topic of underexploited oil fields and the need for Western know-how and technology comes up. One then can focus specifically on oil and gas production in the Tyumen' region, where deals with Western companies have been made (and still can be), and show a map of 10 of its up-and-coming boomtowns that stand to benefit from their major resource and partnerships to develop it.[8] Over the horizon peer other indirectly related business opportunities, for what will these towns need as they grow? Ads for American oil companies provide cues as to possible parties interested in developing oil fields, buying crude to refine into other products, or exporting it. Any short items on barter arrangements -- concerning any commodity -- can be thrown in to add inspiration for conversation and round out impressions of the

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business scene and viable trade mechanisms.

Similarly, Russian gold mines and Kazakh cotton fields can serve as the focus of fairly exhaustive case studies, with tangential excursions into gold reclamation efforts and mass agricultural chemical poisonings as sidelines (i.e., category three facts) that merit consideration and discussion as to their possible impacts.

Authentic current sources can provide a teacher with the following types of materials and topics; although not exhaustive, the list can help in structuring the syllabus and in pinpointing categories to examine separately or from which one can collate a variety of information (maps, pictures, newspaper articles, ads, etc.) to support special focus topics.

1. short items
2. ads for companies, products, services.
3. ads for stock exchanges and brokerage services
4. tables of statistics, data, (opinion) polls
5. maps
6. training and education
7. doing business in the CIS
8. economic predictions, speculations
9. the ruble, inflation, changes in prices
10. exhibits, trade fairs
11. longer descriptive articles on foreign investment
12. the CIS's effect on the world, and the world's effect on the CIS
13. crime

14. business horoscopes

15. cultural differences

16. indirect sources of information, especially humor and satire

Guide questions and text annotation are an effective means of working through all these materials. Guide questions make it possible to cover a variety of material and expose students to more information than they would have been able to absorb unaided in the same time period. This increases their confidence; as students are exposed to more material, the value of the expectedness variable increases, i.e., they are better able to anticipate grammatical forms and fill in logical gaps. Using guide questions encourages the process of discovery. By stimulating students to relate all information available to them -- cultural, linguistic, logical --, and guiding the reasoning process, these aids make learning an accomplishment. The questions should elicit a particular fact or interpretation, and can even concern grammar or morphology to increase the students' competence, but always should lead to the goal of ensuring that they grasp the main idea and can formulate the overall picture. The function of annotation is to clarify obscure words or references to prevent the whole picture from being lost, or even by supplying some nonessential details, helping to complete the picture (to approximate a native speaker's understanding of a text). Students should read, scan, or listen to the assigned text at least once before proceeding with the guide questions. I will conclude with showing some applications of guide questions to two sample texts from which students must make inferences.

1. Monitoring trends and developments from a first-person narrative

Рубль становится тверже

Позавчера я нашел пять рублей. И испугался. Пять рублей были железными.

Звонок в Центральный банк России меня несколько успокоил: приятный голос секретарши (а руководство банка с журналистами отныне по телефону не общается) сказал мне, что эта монетка — нумизматическая редкость, поскольку еще в прошлом году ее чеканил Госбанк СССР, которого теперь нет, и что почти каждому работнику российского банка дарили такие монетки в качестве сувенира.

А может, это и есть те самые российские деньги, думаю. Нет, говорят мне в ликвидируемом Госбанке СССР, железные рубли выпущены еще в конце декабря, продолжают чеканиться по сегодняшний день и распространяются по всей территории бывшего СССР.

Так что думайте сами: класть попавшиеся вам в руки железные рубли под стекло или идти с ними в магазин. Тем более, что Московский метрополитен им. В. И. Ленина зачем-то заказал крупную партию пятидесятикопеечных монет...

1. Explain the headline pun.
2. Why was the writer scared? (What are the implications of the find?)
3. Guess чеканить from context.
4. The word партия occurs frequently in connection with заказ. What kind of партия is mentioned here? How most likely will it be used?

Note: the Moscow metro used to cost five kopeks. What does the writer imply in the closing statement? Does the word inflation come to mind, and did the writer use some synonym of it?

2. Making use of humorous or surprising information

Оказывается, вологжане — очень впечатлительный народ

В марте 1991 года жители Вологды впервые увидели по телевизору эротический фильм, показанный коммерческим

телеканалом. И представьте: через девять месяцев в городе произошел вплеск рождаемости! В течение недели до и после 16 декабря количество родов возросло примерно на 40 процентов.

1. Where did this take place?
2. Вологжане contains a familiar ending; cf. англичане or горожане, from город. Meaning?
3. State the basic content of the news item. Make the connection between the nine-month period and рождаемость. define рождаемость; cf. рождение, родиться.
4. впечатление = impression. (печать = press)
   впечатлительный =
5. Potential business use of the blurb as an advertisement or attention drawer. Compose a short newspaper ad or notice, or TV commercial for a similar event or "product", making a reference or comparison to its success in this town.

NOTES

[1]A proficiency-oriented approach implies developing coping skills for a variety of situations. Research shows that it takes approximately twice the time to learn to function in Russian in a social situation as it does for French or Spanish. See Alice C. Omaggio, *Teaching Language in Context*, (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1986), pp. 21-21.

[2]The focus of the course then should be as practical as possible to prepare students for the needs of a future work environment. American companies with international business interests place primary emphasis on cross-cultural communication and knowledge of how things run and what to expect in a foreign environment, with basic language survival skills (especially oral) playing a secondary role. This translates into emphasis on cultural awareness, foreign language coping skills, and information processing strategy as target concerns of the teacher. See Carol S. Fixman, "The Foreign Language Needs of U.S.-Based Corporations," *Foreign Languages and the Workplace*, ed. Richard D. Lambert and Sarah Jane Moore. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 511 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 25-46.

[3]Students have to learn effective strategies for handling information in Russian. A 'cognitive instruction' approach has students work up to putting themselves in control. Vicki Galloway and Angela Labarca define cognitive instruction as "efforts to help students process information in meaningful ways and to become independent learners; to help students construct meaning, solve problems, develop and select effective strategies, transfer skills and concepts to new situations, and take responsibility for their own learning." This is precisely the type of training necessary to function in a foreign business environment. "From Student to Learner: Style, Process, and Strategy," *New Perspectives and New Directions in Foreign Language Education*, ed. Diane W. Birckbichler (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1990), p. 130.

[4]Task-oriented teaching develops fluency; the need to fill in information gaps facilitates communication. Setting tasks involves arming students with a reason to scan

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for content, thus controlling the expectedness variable and maintaining focus on meaning. See Keith Johnson, "Communicative approaches and communicative processes," *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*, ed. C. J. Brumfit and K. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 200-201.

[5]According to Christopher Brumfit, a communicative approach makes a student-centered classroom feasible. Attention to fluency, particularly basic oral skills, addresses the learners' subjective needs; using what they do or can do as a basis for starting eliminates (to a great extent) confrontation with a deficit-based curriculum. The teacher should expect students to reformulate thoughts and learn strategies to express them, building on what they can do realistically, and fine-tuning their skills as they progress. "'Communicative' language teaching: an educational perspective," *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*, ed. C. J. Brumfit and K. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 188-189.

[6]International business recognizes the need to complement foreign language skills with cultural awareness and area studies knowledge. Former chairman of the board of IBM World Trade Corporation Jacques G. Maisonrouge stated "There is a growing need for international managers, that is, good managers of national companies who are also mobile, adaptable, and at ease in cultures other than their own. Such people should have one or two foreign languages, understand the socio-political environment in which they work and have a world view that inhibits the growth of chauvinistic prejudices." Quoted by Claire Gaudiani and Jerry Wind, "Educating for International Management: The Joseph H. Lauder Institute," *Foreign Languages and International Trade: A Global Perspective*, ed. Samia I. Spencer (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 37-38.

[7]A survey of multinational corporations showed that cross-border dealings call for cultural sensitivity and knowledge of foreign markets, with knowledge of the language of the business partner giving a significant business edge. Understanding cultural differences proves crucial, for these differences affect every phase of international business operations. See Dawn Crawford Balinski, "Foreign Languages and Careers in Multinational Corporations," *Foreign Languages and International Trade: A Global Perspective*, ed. Samia I. Spencer (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 177-182.

[8]*Delovye lyudi*, 20, #2 (Feb. 1992), pp. 24-35.